

“For All the Saints”

Rev. Dr. David Holyan

First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood

Sunday, November 4, 2018

Psalm 24

Of David. A Psalm.

*The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it,
the world, and those who live in it;
for he has founded it on the seas,
and established it on the rivers.*

Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord?

And who shall stand in his holy place?

*Those who have clean hands and pure hearts,
who do not lift up their souls to what is false,
and do not swear deceitfully.*

*They will receive blessing from the Lord,
and vindication from the God of their salvation.*

*Such is the company of those who seek him,
who seek the face of the God of Jacob.*

Selah

Lift up your heads, O gates!

*and be lifted up, O ancient doors!
that the King of glory may come in.*

Who is the King of glory?

*The Lord, strong and mighty,
the Lord, mighty in battle.*

Lift up your heads, O gates!

*and be lifted up, O ancient doors!
that the King of glory may come in.*

Who is this King of glory?

*The Lord of hosts,
he is the King of glory.*

Selah

Revelation 21: 1-6

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

'See, the home of God is among mortals.

He will dwell with them;

they will be his peoples,

and God himself will be with them;

he will wipe every tear from their eyes.

Death will be no more;

*mourning and crying and pain will be no more,
for the first things have passed away.'*

And the one who was seated on the throne said, 'See, I am making all things new.' Also he said, 'Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.' Then he said to me, 'It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life.'

Let us pray. Gracious and loving God, we open our hearts, our minds, our imaginations, and our faith to you and to the power of your holy spirit. I pray that you would take all that we have within. I pray that you would take the words we offer in song and in prayer. The words we've heard read from scripture and the words that you've laid upon my heart this morning to share. Touch, bless, and transform all of those into the living word of Jesus Christ. And let that word, the word of hope, and peace, the word of comfort and challenge, the word of life and light, let that word be with us. And let that word minister to each of us this day. As we gather on this All Saint's Sunday. We ask this in Christ's name, Amen.

In preparing for the sermon this week, I sat down to read commentaries on the passage. I remember that someone told me Eugene Peterson had passed away. And so, I looked him up online and read about this man who, although I had just met him once at a retreat, because of his books and his writings I considered him one of my companions on the journey. I read that in his final week of life his son said he took a sudden turn for the worst. They put him in hospice care and only six days later he passed away. But then he went on to say that even in that final week there was a clear sense that his faith was still with him as he talked to people that no one could see, as he offered prayers that no one understood, and as finally, he let go of his life with calmness and a smile almost to the end.

And as I read those words about letting go of his life with calmness and peace and a smile, I remembered something that I had read years before, and I wish I could find the citation, but essentially the message was that we are here on earth living our lives in preparation for that final moment. That all of life is a setup or a practice for that final moment where we rest--still breathing and alive at the foot of the cross just before we take our final breath. And that what we have to do is figure out how to die well. The author said that if we live well, we're going to die well. And then I remember [laughter] them saying that Church and worship and faith and prayer is all about living well and practicing to get ready to die well. And I held that message in one hand as I remember growing up hearing the message that came through my parents and grandparents and those around me that you need to be educated in order to work, work, work. And then if you're lucky, you'll retire and you'll have in those final moments some peace. But somehow all of life is just about working and accumulating and getting ahead and being more or better than. And then if you're lucky at the end, you'll have a few of what they call the golden years.

And then I decided to read the list of names. And there are on that list were some who have lived a long and good life. Someone like Bob Wells who lived over 100 years. And then there are some on that list like Andy Houston who lived way too short. And I thought about what is the message that the Scripture is trying to give to us as Christians who this day celebrate and honor those who have gone before us. I, for one, have always been a little bit afraid of Revelation. Some of the language and the imagery, I don't understand it. It's a bit scary and I'm not quite sure what to do with it. But this passage seems very clear to tell us almost at the very beginning of it that God is alive among us, God wants to dwell with us, we are God's people, and that God Himself will comfort us in our lives.

But then says, "Death will be no more mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away." That part remains a mystery to me. And I can hope that that's the case in the life to come. But I can hang onto the fact that the passage talks about God's presence among us now. And as I read the commentaries about the passage it talks about that this is a figurative story about who we are and how we will end our lives. We will end them with God's presence being with us always. And then the commentary pointed back to Genesis at the beginning where there's the figurative story of God reaching God's hand into the dirt and breathing into it the breath of life, the Spirit, and if that Spirit is with us from the moment we are conceived until the moment we die and then it's released, and between those moments of birth and death, God's Spirit is within each of us and so, the question becomes for you and for me, what do we do with this gift? How do we live our lives in order to honor the gift of life and the gift of faith? I wish I knew the answer. I wish I could stand before you and tell each of you, "Do this and you'll be exactly on track according to God's deepest desires." But it's a struggle to know. Just as it's often a struggle to name why someone we love has gone. But it was in the midst of

this holding the question--what is this all about if there's the gift given at the beginning and the gift departs at the end? Then what is the outcome of all of that?

Another hero emerged through a book. Henry Nouwen. The book is *Discernment*. And it shares the story that he had when he was living at a Trappist monastery trying to discern if he should leave the academic life and become a monk. It says that one day while he was walking through the monastery he went into a room that he had never been to before and he saw a painting or a rendering of a painting called the *Flute Player*. It's of a young man standing there playing the flute. And he said, framed with a quote from Thoreau, that says, "Why should we be in such desperate haste to succeed and in such desperate enterprises? If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which hears, however, measured or far away."

Nouwen says that as he stood there and studied that image and thought about that passage, he could hear the invitation from God for him to listen to his own drummer. To the different tune that was beating within. And then he said, "I remember that one of the books Thomas Merton wrote was called a "Different Drummer." And this is what it says in that book: "When I reflected on the flute player, I knew myself as restless and searching. I felt I was stumbling over my own compulsions and illusions way too often. During my time at the monastery, I began to understand that when we listen to the spirit we hear a deeper sound, a different beat. The great movement of the spiritual life is from not hearing life to listening to life."

From a life in which we experience ourselves as separated, isolated, and lonely away from God to a life in which we hear the guiding and healing voice of God. A voice that is with us and a voice that will never leave us alone. The many activities in which we are involved, the many concerns that occupy our time, the many activities that captures our imaginations, all of these sounds that surround us make it hard to hear the still, small voice through which God's presence speaks to each of us."

On a day like today, we honor the still, small voice. We honor our loved ones who have gone before us. But most of all today we honor the gift that each of us has given. The gift of life. And as to what we are to do with this gift I don't have the answer. But I want to suggest that there's a way of living. It may not be the what of who we are but it is the how of who we are that we can hang on to. For just as we know that Christ served others in his ministry on earth, we too are to serve others. And we are to do so gently and with compassion and with honesty and truth.

And then I go back and I remember Bob Wells. I realize that the messages that I received as a child are not true. For this man lived for 40 years after his retirement. For 40 years he shared the gift that God had made him in ways that did not involve his work or his busyness or his accomplishments or anything that we hold of value in our world today. So brothers and sisters, let us not squander the gift of life. But let us share it with everyone, Amen.